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ABSTRACT

The author discusses his observations from administering such tests as the Denver Developmental Screening Test (DDST) to young disabled children in Costa Rica. Cultural influences and nuances of translations are seen to affect performance. Factors involved in remediation programing are also noted. A final consideration is the "barrio effect" in which children refrain from responding out of fear of the examiner. (CL)

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PITFALLS IN THE MULTICULTURAL DIAGNOSTIC / REMEDIAL PROCESS: A CENTRAL AMERICAN EXPRERIENCE

BY

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NOTE:

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PITFALLS IN THE MULTICULTURAL DIAGNOSTIC/REMEDIAL PROCESS: A CENTRAL AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

Not too long ago, late at night, in the Secretary of Education's office in Washington, D.C., Estados Unidos, un crippled gato with crutches estaba enseñando a un gatito. They were standing by a mouse hole cuando el gato dijo, "Atención, little kitten! Escuche con mucho cuidado . . . 'WOOF! WOOF!' " Presently a mouse came out of the hole to see what all the noise was about. Exactamente en ese momento el gato caught the mouse con sus muletas and said to the little gatito, "Mira, ahora usted entiende la importancia of bilingual educación especial."

Now that the importance of paying attention to the special needs of exceptional children who are culturally different is well established, as evidenced by the first national conference in New Orleans during February, 1981, certain priority items in the diagnostic/remedial process need immediate attention. If proper Individualized Educational Programs are to be prepared to guarantee aprropiate services for all minority groups, extra attention must be focused on language and cultural differences. The observations that follow result from experiences involved in the working with Spanish-speaking exceptional children and in the conducting of a large research project in a Central American country.

RATIONALE

Costa Rica, having one of the highest literacy rates in all of Latin America and a correspondingly high standard of living, provides one of the most comprehensive systems of special education in the entire region. Several governmental and private agencies as well as the University of Costa Rica devote an exceptional amount of their energies in providing improved services for the disabled (de Mezerville, 1980). The vast majority of the leaders and personnel in these programs have recent advanced degrees in special education from the United States. Their resources, however, for the development of standardized tests are somewhat limited. The research facet of the author's experience deals with the standardization and adaptation of the Denver Developmental Screening Test (DDST) which is widely used throughout the country. Thirty nine (39) university-student examiners were directed to pay particular attention to language and cultural problems associated with each of the 105 test items administered.

The author also interviewed school psychologists, studied diagnostic protocols, and observed the behavior of many exceptional children throughout the country. A small pilot study was conducted on one special class in an attempt to discover problems associated with the administration of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) in comparison with the Slosson Intelligence Test (SIT) and with teacher evaluations of classroom performance. The WISC is also widely used, often with confounding results. Probably the most valuable information to be gained from these investigations relate to the importance of devoting extraordinary attention to language and cultural differences during the diagnostic/remedial process.

COMPARATIVE LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL OBSERVATIONS IN DIAGNOSIS

The following represents some of the observations associated with the administration of the DDST and data collected from personnel working with very young children. In general, the white, middle-class majority of U.S. citizens (for whom schools are basically designed and who represent the majority of sample populations for most tests) place a great emphasis in child-rearing practices on the development of independence. The nuclear family and high mobility rate in the United States has become accepted as the "American Way." Children are trained from an early age to use the telephone and to memorize their street addresses, which often consist of four numbers or more. On the contrary, Latin American families tend to attach great importance to the extended family concept. Many rural Costa Rican families do not have telephones, and children remain close to home and dependent on their parents and/or grandparents for a prolonged period of time. It is not uncommon for young children to remain "on the bottle" until entering school at the age of seven. Some are exposed to other

children in pre-schools where peer pressure may encourage the abondonment of the baby bottle in public at an earlier age. Many retain this habit, however, until the age of five. This does not neccessarily result in delayed development, but when the average Costa Rican child is tested with the DDST on such items as "Drinks from cup unassisted without much spilling," he is at a disadvantage when compared to a child in the U.S. of the same age who has had much more practice in such an activity. The Personal-Social area of the DDST (other areas include-Gross Motor, Fine Motor, and Language) includes several other items that also place a strong emphasis on the development of independence.

In the Fine Motor section of the DDST the use of raisins is required in the administration of six different items. This creates a rather severe problem when administering this test on a large scale because raisins are extremely expensive and not always readily available. The lack of exposure to raisins by the vast majority of the population could bias test performances. The substitution of similar, more familiar materials may not elicit the responses desired by the authors of the test. As long as the examiner and users of the test results are aware of such differences and use common sense in the decision-making process, dangers of misdiagnosis and errors in program planning should be minimized.

Even when the Costa Rican adaptation of the Puerto-Rican Spanish version of the WISC is used, unexpected results occurred. In many cases children scored low on all sub-tests, but scored exceptionally high on the alternate test of "Mazes." Two school psychologists hypothesized that because all of these children had worked in the harvesting of coffee, where they had literally walked through mazes for many hours from a young age, their experience gave them a distinct advantage over their U.S. peers on this particular sub-test. When it came to responding to the item on the WISC that asks, "What is the thing to do when you cut your finger?" the child must first overcome shock from the translation that implies the finger has been cut completely off! After it is explained that the finger is only slightly injured, the usual response is, "...put coffee grounds on it," which is normal treatment in rural areas, but results in failure of the item. It was observed that many children scored significantly lower on the WISC than their classroom academic performance would incicate. It appears that it is quite possible that cultural factors have helped depress the scores of these children.

One item in the most commonly used tests in the U.S., such as the Stanford-Binet intelligence test, the SIT, the Illinois Tests of Psycholinguistic Abilities (ITPA), WISC and others, is the repeating of a series of digits given out of sequence. Most U.S. children are asked to practice this feat at a very early age. U.S. parents insist that their children memorize their phone numbers (usually 7 digits plus area code) and street addresses (quite often 4 or 5 digits) in case they might get lost. Schools require the same children to write these same numbers over and over again. Children memorize their friends' phone numbers and write letters and address envelopes early in life. In Costa Rica all children, urban and rural, have addresses or give directions that rely solely on a sereies of landmarks. A typical address might be as follows: 300 meters south of St. Ann's church, 100 meters west of the soccer field, opposite the store with blue trim around the windows. Phone numbers are learned in three sets of 2-digit numbers, like 24-67-85, and telephones are not nearly as commonly used by young children as in the U.S. Needless to say, performance on items requiring short-term memory and repetition of series of numbers usually fall well below U.S. norms. On the ITPA, however, a Costa Rican child who appears to be average according to all modes of assessment will score far above the U.S. norms on tests of visual memory. There is some speculation that since a child is required to remember many landmarks in going from one place to another, he may develop special skills in visual awareness and systems of memory. These same students, however, scored far below U.S. norms on the ITPA auditory memory subtests. The average Latin American family is often quite large and conversations in the home often find more than one person speaking at one time. In the schools the usual U.S. insistence on super-quiet classrooms is generally not observed and most of the instruction require the student to copy entire lessons in writing. The noise and confusion and lack of practice in attending to auditory signals that require responses may contribute to difficulties with auditory memory.

Much of the learning in schools is by rote, and this might explain the difficulties that many Costa Rican children have with the three items on the SIT that deal with similarities and differences. Most U.S. children have many opportunities to engage in classification and comparison discussions in the classroom. In the U.S. where the influence of advanced technology supports the emphasis on production and achievement, time is an essential component of success. It appears that Latin Americans do no attach so much importance to time. Two items that appear on the SIT normed at 7 years-2 months (How many days in a week?) and 7 years-10 months (How many months in a year?) proved to be very difficult for children as old as 11 years of age. Time is not emphasized in the child rearing process, nor in the classroom, therefore Latin American children are placed at a disadvantage when given test items that emphasize this area.

Even items that translate easily and would appear on the surface to be easily understood, need careful attention. For example, the SIT item of, "Show me your thumb" may present difficulties as the usual word for thumb, pulgar, may be understood in urban areas, but children in one province would respond only to dedo gordo, or fat finger!

REMEDIATION

The same attention given to diagnosis should be applied to program planning and materials selection. The much maligned Continental Press mimeographed materials used in the U.S. appear to be quite useful in the Spanish versions. The University of Costa Rica has produced a practical set of materials for teachers to use with children exhibiting difficulties in gross motor coordination, spatial relations, visual-motor coordination and auditory memory (Stover, et al, 1976). The latter would apparently be appropriate for all children, since a general weakness in this area appears to be associated with cultural differences. UNICEF (1980) has published excellent infant stimulation materials for use in Central America and Panama. The use of Bliss Symbols for language development and cross-cultural communication has also proved to be very successful.

Perhaps the wide attention now being given to the provision of special services for multilingual/multicultural populations will uncover an even more important discovery. That is, the presentation of excellent opportunities for native English speaking teachers and classmates to learn about new languages and cultures from those of differing backgrounds. The majority can broaden their own horizons while developing a respect for individual differences of the minority.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Diagnostic and screening devices that are not developed for and standardized on a particular population, should not be used with that population, without modifications and adjustments. All of the preceeding examples of language and cultural influences on test responses are but a small sample of problems that might be associated with multicultural assessment. Adequate assessment involving multilingual problems requires a great sensitivity on the part of the examiner, along with the utilization of a great deal of common sense in the interpretation of the results of all tests administered.

Another phenomenon related to testing Spanish speaking children in the U.S. and was also found in Costa Rica, is known in the U.S. as the "barrio effect" (Chavarria,1980). In these cases the child appears to refrain from responding out of fear of the examiner. In many cases this phenomenon is particularly acute when the examiner is obviously from a different culture and can be identified as different by appearance or speech. Chavarria made a concerted effort to dress and speak in a manner familiar to the child (both being of Spanish descent and native speakers of Spanish) and it still took her one week of rapport building to get her subjects to participate to their level of ability. In general, in Costa Rica, children are shy and withdrawn when confronted with people acting in an official capacity.

One last caution: screen all materials extremely carefully. The sign-language chart for the deaf used in the U.S. not only needed to include extra symbols for n and ch, but the letter t had to be changed because the symbol represented a vulgar gesture commonly used by many Latin Americans!

In Spanish the "Cruz Roja" (often shortened to the "Cruz") typically represents the Red Cross and its emergency ambulance service. Well, it seems that sometime in the '60's Jesus returned to earth and was travelling with a group of U.S. hippies in Mexico when He was hit by a car. A Mexican bystander shouted, "Quick, get the "Cross!" At this point the victim struggled to his feet and rapidly hobbled away, saying, "No that's O.K., I'll be all right!"

Think about it---cross cultural communication and respect for differences are extremely important.

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